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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of middle grade children and of their particular needs, as well as new teaching methods appropriate for this age level are needed for middle school teachers to be successful. Without the necessary coursework and student teaching experience, preservice teachers often feel unprepared to deal with middle level students. At Ohio State University Lima (OSU-Lima), most coursework for elementary majors is geared to the elementary self-contained classroom, yet surrounding schools all have the middle school configuration of grades 5-8, 4-8, or 6-8. There is no specific middle level coursework, and attitudes toward middle level teaching are not positive. One educational psychology class offered middle level preparation (lecture, group discussion, small group work, and field experiences in the middle grades) to see if attitudes toward teaching middle school could be made more positive. Students surveyed before and after the course made such comments as: middle school students have different needs and are harder to work with than high school students; special training is needed for middle school teaching; and teachers need to know more content to work in middle school. It is evident that universities must consider curriculum changes and offer methods classes specifically aimed at the middle grades as well as longer field experiences in middle schools. (SM)

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Preparing Teachers - A Middle School-University Partnership

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Perhaps the longest running, most extensive educational reform movement in the United States is that of the development of middle grade education (Lounsbury, 1990). Eighty years ago the concept of the Junior High School was just being formulated. By the 1940's some organization of a "junior high" was in place with usually a 7-8 or 7-8-9 grade structure. It is only recently that studies and surveys have shown the middle school concept had caught on and often that was in grade configuration only (Lounsbury, 1990).

There have been many definitions given for the middle school, which has now come to mean a different configuration from that of the traditional junior high school. Educators have come to understand the diverse needs of the middle school population, usually including students ranging in age from 10 to 14. Lounsbury (1990) states that "no other group of grades encompasses so diverse a population." Educators now agree that early adolescence is more than a transition and is probably one of the most crucial periods of life. While the senior high has been given a special status in the education system, the middle school is now viewed by many to be the more important institution.

There are many variations on the structure and philosophy of the middle level. Some important organizational considerations have been given by Trauschke and Mooney (1974).

1. The dynamic physical, social, and intellectual changes occurring in 10- to 14 year olds must be considered and programs provided to help students understand these changes taking place in themselves.
2. Grade nine is generally associated with the senior high school as ninth graders are more like 10, 11, and 12th grade students.
3. Innovations such as team teaching, individualized instruction and

flexible scheduling should be encouraged.

4. Middle schools should de-emphasize sophisticated activities found in the high school and promote the personal development of the student.
5. Middle schools should provide earlier opportunities for exploratory studies and enrichment activities than elementary schools.
6. The staff should have the unique combination of an elementary orientation combined with specialization in a given field.

The Department of Education, teacher education institutions, textbook publishers, and the public in general have been accused of ignoring the differences and special needs of middle school students. In June, 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued a report that helped change such views. It recognized the need for changes in the curriculum, smaller schools, the elimination of tracking and special preparation of teachers (Middle Schools Unprepared, 1989). While the report and the National Middle School Association have given much needed publicity to the topic, there is still much to be done.

One problem that can be solved with the help of teacher education institutions is the role of the teacher in the middle school. Limited, traditional views of teaching must be changed. Knowledge of middle grade children, their particular needs, and new teaching methods are needed for teachers of this level to be successful. More research is needed. "The teacher's perception of the early adolescent's unique physical and social development must be understood as must the relationship between educators and 10-14 year old learners" (Manning, 1989-90).

To begin solving this problem, both the State Departments of Education and teacher training institutions must work together. More and more states

are differentiating the middle level with a special certification and colleges and universities must keep pace by providing the necessary coursework and field experiences. In Ohio, as in other states, this has yet to be accomplished. In a report from Alexander and McEwin (1988) they state that there has been only a 3% increase since 1981 in the number of AACTE institutions offering middle level preparation courses.

Without the necessary courses, college students may feel unprepared to deal with middle level students. In some research by Sage (1989-90) it was found that when San Diego State University secondary majors were given the opportunity to student teach at both the middle and secondary levels, the majority chose to do the shortest assignment at the middle level. For most, their ultimate goal was to teach at a secondary school. No special courses for the middle level are offered at San Diego State.

The same problems exists in elementary education. Elementary majors often choose field experiences in the lower grades--K-4. The majority student teach in those same levels, often listing fear of the upper levels, or inadequate content preparation as reasons for their choices.

George and Anderson (1989) state: "Few colleges and universities provide graduates of teacher education programs who are prepared as candidates for middle school positions." They go on to add that even tenured teachers who are faced with the reorganization into a middle school have little information about needed skills to choose to teach there.

It is interesting to note that in studies of the most successful middle school teachers, the majority held elementary certificates. "Administrators in the new middle schools saw teachers with elementary level backgrounds as more positive in general" (George, 1990). This NASSP Bulletin article went on to say that principals valued elementary trained teachers for their intuitive understanding of students and felt that the

infusion of such teachers into middle schools was the most successful outcome of the whole process. While sixth grade teams were cited as the most successful, the least successful teams tended to be staffed by predominately secondary-oriented teachers with extensive junior high experience.

In a national survey of attitudes toward middle grade certification (De Medio and Mazur-Stewart, 1990) it was shown again that lack of properly trained personnel was a major problem. It was felt that in states without middle-school certification teacher-preparation institutions were not prompted to provide the necessary courses nor teachers encouraged to prepare for careers in middle schools. The study verified the need for special preparation. The results showed that both teachers and principals employed at the middle level support the belief that any one preparing to teach middle grade students needs special middle grade preparation and appropriate middle grade certification.

In Ohio, education majors must complete 300-hours of field and/or clinical experiences prior to a 300-hour student teaching assignment. At some institutions those early field experiences are divided between elementary, middle and secondary sites, requiring both elementary and secondary majors to experience all three sites. However, this is not the case everywhere.

Some of the problems with such a requirement lie with the schools themselves. Because the middle grades are usually departmentalized and follow a schedule similar to high school, it is more difficult to arrange field experiences. While elementary teachers often welcome a second pair of hands in the classroom, middle level teachers may not.

At The Ohio State University, Lima Campus, elementary majors receive the majority of their coursework geared to the elementary self-contained

classroom. This is unfortunate because the surrounding schools have all converted to the middle school configuration of 5-8, 4-8, or 6-8. Even the Lima City schools will be changing to middle schools in the near future. Mainly because of scheduling and a secondary type curriculum, it has always been more convenient to limit field experiences to the elementary schools.

The OSU-Lima Campus does not offer specific coursework for the middle level, but has realized the necessity of offering elementary majors the opportunity to learn more about the middle school structure and nature of this age of children. In order to see if attitudes toward teaching at the middle level could be made more positive one educational psychology class was specifically designed to include middle level preparation.

The class began as usual with lecture, group discussion and small group work. Field experiences were arranged at 2 sites with half the class going to an area middle school (6-8) and the other half to an inner city junior high school (7-9). A special assignment was included at the junior high school. When school dismissed at 2:30 p.m. any student failing a subject or anyone needing help with homework was required to stay an additional one-half hour. Teachers were assigned to rooms specifically set up for tutoring purposes. The OSU students were assigned to individual junior high students to tutor during the duration of their field experience.

One week before the field experience began, the class was given a short survey of ten statements regarding their attitude or understanding of middle grade students. Immediately afterward, Dr. Brent Wendling, a middle school principal from an area school district spoke to the class about the special needs of middle school children and the differences between a middle school and a junior high. He brought with him 4 middle school students representing various grades and academic levels. The younger

students were introduced to the class and then were left to speak together with no intimidation from the principal or professor. The middle schcol students soon "opened-up" and freely discussed their likes and dislikes of teachers, administrators and school in general. On a final evaluation for the quarter, OSU students stated that this opportunity to talk to middle school students was very beneficial.

Shortly after meeting with the students, OSU education majors began their field experiences. The placements were all in the afternoon and ran for 12 days over the middle part of the quarter. While the group going to the inner city junior high had the most concern they were in agreement that they had the best experience with the students. They reported negative feelings toward some of the teachers and the methods of instruction being used in the classrooms. This was probably influenced by the fact that they were all seeing last period classes. However, they also reported the most interaction with the students because of the after-school tutoring.

Both groups of OSU students reported surprise at the similarly to senior high schools. Classes were often boring, with lectures and note taking. Many teachers seemed to care little about their students and often pointed out negative characteristics and problem students. OSU students were also surprised that the middle level students were really no different from upper elementary students. They were eager for help on the most part and quickly accepted the OSU students into their rooms.

The tutoring went so well that a problem soon arose regarding homework assignments. The OSU students reported that their tutees often knew the material but just weren't motivated to do it. With constant urging and in some cases, a tangible reward, homework started being turned in. Soon afterwards one teacher accused an OSU student of doing the homework for the junior high student. It appeared that the teacher refused to believe the

boy could actually do the work himself. That was both a blow to the OSU student and to the ego of the boy. Because it was near the end of the year many teachers told the OSU students that even with tutoring and better grades these students couldn't possibly pass their courses. This was a taken very hard by all the OSU students putting so much time and effort into their assignment. The negative attitude of these middle level teachers disturbed and dampened the spirit of many of the OSU students. Luckily, there were some good reports back about excellent teachers, some who would not want to teach at any other level.

When the experience was over the class once again completed the ten item survey regarding their attitude and knowledge of middle school students.

The pre and posttest scores were analyzed for each of the ten statements using the t Test. Survey items and t scores are reported below. Students responded to the ten statements by using a 4-point scale-1 representing strongly disagree to 4 representing strongly agree (see p. 11 for complete questionnaire).

1. Middle school/Jr. high students have different needs than high school students.
2. Middle/Jr. high students are harder to work with than elementary students.
3. By the middle grades, students are about the same in physical and emotional development.
4. To teach at the middle level a person should have special training.
5. Discipline is a greater problem at the middle level.
6. Elementary teachers are better qualified to handle the needs of middle level students.

7. The middle grades should serve as a transition from elementary to high school.
8. Most perceptions held by the public regarding middle adolescents are negative one.
9. Teachers need to know more content to teach at the middle level.
10. When I teach I will definitely consider the middle grades.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results for the Ten Survey Items

Question #	Pretest M	Pretest SD	Posttest M	Posttest SD	t
1.	3.40	.67	3.70	.47	2.34*
2.	2.82	.65	2.95	.81	.77
3.	1.97	.81	1.47	.57	3.04**
4.	2.60	.62	3.32	.72	4.63***
5.	2.90	.66	3.20	.71	1.87
6.	2.53	.72	2.37	.72	.94
7.	3.43	.68	3.53	.63	.59
8.	2.83	.75	3.27	.52	3.07**
9.	2.76	.83	2.97	.86	1.20
10.	2.83	.75	2.93	.78	.68

* $p < .025$
** $p < .005$
*** $p < .0002$

In looking at the items found to be statistically significant (#1, 3, 4, 8), item #4 agrees with the findings of De Medio and Mazur-Stewart (1990). College students agree with teachers and principals that special training is needed for the middle level.

Item #8 showed an interesting reversal in students' beliefs about public perceptions about middle grade students. The class originally

disagreed with the statement (mean = 2.83). However, after learning more about the middle grades and completing a field experience they came to agree more with the statement (mean = 3.27). This change may be explained by student comments about the teachers and schools. While the OSU students found the middle level to be less frightening than expected they brought back many negative comments from teachers. Perhaps the teacher talk regarding the behavior and attitudes of middle grade students made the OSU students feel there was more of a negative public attitude than they had originally perceived. If the OSU students had shared those negative perceptions one would have expected a greater change in attitude for items #2, and 5.

While item #10 did not show a significant change, 12 out of the 30 students felt they would be more inclined to accept a position at a middle school after completing the experience than before.

If the middle school movement continues and elementary preparation is preferred at that level then universities must consider curriculum changes. Methods classes specifically aimed at the middle grades as well as more and longer field experiences in middle schools are needed. Cooperation between the schools and universities can help solve the problem of poorly prepared teachers. Together they can provide experiences and courses that help the elementary major see the purpose of the middle school and his/her place in it.

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